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Panjabi Bolo: Endless Obstacles to Minority Language Survival

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Abstract

Every social group possesses its own linguistic system (oral and written). In addition to being essential for communication and idea exchange, language also serves as a cultural indicator for a particular ethnic identity. The technological innovations present a number of obstacles, in particular for ethnic minorities, when it pertains to the safeguarding of the authentic form of the language. Malaysian Sikhs, a minority within a minority in the country, are no exception. The Sikh community of Malaysia is an ethnolinguistic and ethnocultural group that seems to be culturally rooted but is experiencing a gradual decline in the use of its historical language. Considering this, this article explores the ongoing difficulties faced by the Sikh community in preserving their mother tongue. This study's findings were derived from in-depth interviews with Panjabi youths conducted via Google Forms and Zoom calls. Three themes emerged from the interview analysis regarding the language challenges faced by Sikh youths. The members' use of Panjabi was hampered by an unsupportive environment, a lack of parental initiative, and lack of exposure to socio-religious materials. The research led to the conclusion that the Panjabi language could be preserved if parents made an effort to guide their children and emphasised the significance of speaking their mother tongue. The Panjabi language is an important but perilous part of cultural heritage that must be protected for the sake of future generations. Researchers have forecast that the Panjabi language will deteriorate to the point where it will become extinct if proactive measures to preserve the language are not taken.

Keywords: Panjabi language, sustainability, minority community, Malaysian Sikhs'

Introduction

Culture and language preservation are inextricably interwoven (Ali, 2010). The velocity of globalisation has posed a threat to minority language usage, which was already in danger. Minority communities in Malaysia must be fluent in Malay and English because these languages are more valuable in terms of "education, occupation, socialisation, urbanisation, and economy" (Ali, 2010, p.1). Regrettably, this has caused many individuals to disregard the need of conversing in their mother tongue, let alone conserving it. According to Majzub and Rais (2011), it is essential for a person to speak his or her mother tongue in order to preserve and advance his or her culture. By using one's native language, identity and self-esteem are further

strengthened. When natives of a given community no longer speak their mother tongue on a broad scale, a language is deemed to be dying or at risk of extinction (Khokhlova, 2014). Many causes, including "migration, globalisation, state policy, pressure by majority language(s), political pressure, and the hunt for professional possibilities", have been mentioned for the abandoning of a particular language (Haider et al., 2021, p.104).

One of the most frequently spoken Indo-Aryan languages is Panjabi. The older British spelling "Punjabi" is still more widely used than the more exact "Panjabi" spelling. As of the turn of the 21st century, an estimated 113 million people spoke it as their native language. Panjabi is the most spoken native language in Pakistan and the eleventh most spoken in India. Significant overseas diasporas speak the language, mainly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Southeast Asia. Curiously, despite being the language of the predominant group in Pakistan, the Panjabi language has suffered a 'intellectual death' (Haider et al., 2021, p.104). According to Nazir et al. (2013), several factors contributed to the intellectual death of the Panjabi language in Pakistan. Yet, this is primarily attributable to parents. Parents in Pakistan believe that the Panjabi language lacks prestige, hence it is not essential for their children to learn it as their primary language of communication. To gain insight into the language preservation issue on a local level, researchers seek to compare the efforts made by various ethnic or minority groups in Malaysia. This will facilitate a better understanding of the obstacles faced by Malaysian Sikhs in maintaining their native language. The focus of this article is to draw a comparison between the language preservation efforts of the Chinese and Tamilan communities versus that of the Panjabi Sikh community.

Chinese Malaysians Versus Malaysian Sikhs

The Chinese Malaysian community is one of the largest minority groups in Malaysia, and their mother tongue languages (such as Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkien) are widely spoken and taught in schools. Comparing the language preservation efforts of Chinese Malaysians with those of Malaysian Sikhs could highlight differences in government support, cultural attitudes towards language, and the availability of language education resources. Building on the language education resources, Hung's (2013) majority Malaysian Chinese respondents were of the view that the Malaysian vernacular education system is a positive tool in aiding the Malaysian Chinese to preserve their cultural diversity and language. The vernacular schools aid in not only transmitting literacy, but also Chinese values and culture among the community. Hung's (2013) study concluded that Malaysian Chinese embrace both their linguistic and cultural diversity as a national asset. The pride taken by the Malaysian Chinese in preserving their linguistic identity shows a stark difference from the efforts taken to preserve a minority language like Panjabi as stated above.

Tamil Malaysians Versus Malaysian Sikhs

Tamil Malaysians make up another significant minority group in Malaysia, and Tamil is one of the official languages of the country. However, like Malaysian Sikhs, Tamil Malaysians may face challenges in preserving their mother tongue language in the face of cultural assimilation and linguistic pressures. This was highlighted well by Ponniah et al., (2017), in which respondents in their study indicated the lesser economic value attached to Tamil

language as a reason for not picking up on the mother tongue. Another reason given was pride in which many Malaysian Tamil speaking individuals indicated a shift towards usage of English and Malay as they feel those languages have higher prestige value compared to Tamil. Their study further revealed that most of the respondents were of the view that "Tamil is not a high-class language and therefore opt for English instead" (Ponniah et al., 2017, p.146). Researchers in the current study strongly believe that this notion of mother tongue being regarded as "low value" among both the Punjabi community and Tamilian community should be further looked into. Comparing the experiences of these two groups could shed light on common obstacles to language preservation, as well as unique factors that influence language use and maintenance. As for the selection of the topic and population, the authors of the current study chose to focus on Malaysian Sikhs because they are a relatively small and distinct minority group in Malaysia, with a unique cultural and linguistic heritage that is in danger of being lost. By studying the language preservation efforts of this community, the authors are able to provide insights that could be applicable to other minority groups facing similar challenges in other contexts, especially when the issues faced are as similar as highlighted by Ponniah et al., (2017).

Coming back to the context of the current study, it is no longer an isolated problem; rather, it is a challenge that the Panjabi community all over the world must face together in order to ensure that the Panjabi language continues to retain its originality and authenticity in written and spoken form. When it comes to preserving the original form of a language, technological advancements provide a variety of problems, particularly for linguistic minorities. Malaysian Sikhs, a subgroup inside a subgroup, are not an exception. The Sikh community of Malaysia is an ethnolinguistic and ethnocultural group that appears to be culturally anchored but is gradually losing its historical language. Among the glaring gap that researchers in the current study discovered was that there was very little to zilch mention on the opportunities of cultivating the usage of Panjabi language via multiple media usage, be it comics or videos or even written materials. Another gap which the researchers discovered in a number of local academic journals which highlighted the usage of Panjabi language among Malaysian Sikhs were how the onus is always put on the younger community members for not knowing how to speak in their mother tongue, but little is investigated about the circumstances leading to the decline in usage of mother tongue among Malaysian Sikhs. In light of this, this article investigates the continued challenges the Sikh community has in preserving their mother tongue and hopes to contribute in highlighting practical areas of improvement which can be implemented by the community members.

Literature Review

Echoing the plight of many other minority communities across the globe, the Malaysian Sikh Punjabi community is also seen highlighting the steady decline of its community member's usage of the Panjabi language over the years. There is a sharp decrease in the level of proficiency of the language as more community members find it easier to express and communicate in other languages. Based on David, Naji, & Kaur's (2003) study, the Sikh community in Klang Valley speaks Panjabi very less, be it to the in-group within the community or even in their own family setting. Interestingly, according to Manan (2011) as cited in David, Dealwais, & Nambiar (2015, p.10), the Sikh community in Malaysia seem to be still deeply rooted culturally but is seen experiencing a continuous decrease in the usage of its heritage

language. Zuo (2007) highlighted that one of the main problems plaguing the world in 21st century is the language death of a huge number of the world's languages. This problem can be attributed by various factors such as "technological, social, cultural, and economic trends of globalization" (Zuo, 2007 as cited in Majzub & Rais (2011, p.1678). "Cultural and linguistic homogenization" (Zuo, 2007, as cited in Majzub & Rais (2011, p.1678) were found to be the reasons why "free markets" of globalised ideology exists which further threatens the extinction of minority groups mother tongue.

Apart than looking at the positive changes brought by globalization to fields such as technology, economics and politics, one should take a moment to observe the downside of globalization too; the quick changes on one's ideology on his or her system of beliefs and values (Laoire, 2008). With minority languages slowly dying, English has taken the centre stage as the world's strongest and fast spreading global language, followed by Spanish and Chinese. English language, due to its ability to allow people access to knowledge and information has been recognised as an international and globalized language. This is true in a Malaysian context as well. Despite Bahasa Melayu being the national language, there is a high emphasis on knowing and mastering the English language as it brings along with it a status symbol and economic value, just as stated by Nida (1975) in describing the communication functions of language, which are based on cultural identity. Nida's (1975) functional role of language aptly describes the Malaysian situation of having in-groups (i.e.: minority group's usage of their mother tongue such as Sikhs usage of Panjabi language to communicate with members of the community) and out-groups (i.e.: majority group's usage of dominant languages such as English and Malay to communicate with members of various ethnic groups).

But what happens when the members of the in-groups themselves are no longer able to communicate in their mother tongue to another in the community? Many linguistic researchers across the world have called for more serious measures to be implemented in order to preserve the endangered languages by further improving the writing systems and also production of written materials (Mufwene, 2004). This is why researchers in the current study would like to seek information from people who are the heart of the issue; Malaysian Sikhs and also parents who seems to be more comfortable speaking in other languages but not Panjabi language. It is imperative to comprehend the environmental factors which often leads to the erosion of a native mother tongue.

Research Methods

This study collected data utilising a survey technique that was not only cost- and time-effective, but also complied with existing endemic rules. The poll, which is separated into two portions, was completed by 63 individuals, both parents and non-parents, in total. Part A comprises of structured questions regarding their demographics, including their gender, age, and educational attainment. Part B focuses on semi-structured questionnaires that allow respondents to share their experiences and knowledge on the researched linguistic problems. Researchers utilised the snowball method by forwarding the survey and requesting that respondents transmit it to their connections. Snowballing is a method for extending the size of a sample by requesting a single informant to recommend more interviewees (Babbie, 1995). The URL to the Google survey forms has been circulated on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. As soon as the researchers received the survey responses, they began initial coding, which indicated a wide variety of codes. Researchers merged several codes into a wider theme

because it was later determined that some of the thoughts stated by participants were repeated, albeit in different language. To ensure an ethical study, the researchers developed a specific informed consent 'agreement' to obtain participants' informed permission. Also, the researchers protected the secrecy of data utilisation, and all questions were anonymous.

Results and Discussion

63 participants responded to the survey with 57.1 percent of the participants were female, whereas 42.9 percent were male. The majority of participants were between 30 and 44 years old (42.9 percent), 18 to 29 years old (31.7 percent), 45 to 59 years old (22.2 percent), and 60 and older (3.2 percent). 63.5 percent of the participants are married, 34.9 percent are single, while 1.6% are divorced or separated. Regarding education, 60.3% have a bachelor's degree or more, 19.0% have completed secondary school, 17.5% have a college diploma, and 3.2% have a technical or vocational education.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Percentage
Gender	
Female	57.1%
Male	42.9%
Age Group	
18-29 years old	31.7%
30-44 years old	42.9%
45-59 years old	22.2%
60 years old or older	3.2%
Marital Status	
Married	63.5%
Single	34.9%
Divorced/Separated	1.6%
Education	
Bachelor's degree or more	60.3%
Secondary school completion	19.0%
College diploma	17.5%
Technical/Vocational education	3.2%

Source: Survey Data Collection

The poll uncovered three major themes: an unsupportive atmosphere, a lack of parental initiative, and inadequate exposure to socio-religious materials. Yet, in order to gain insight into Panjabi language, respondents were asked to anticipate its future. The response was viewed as disheartening. The future of the language is viewed as bleak, not bright, dull, in danger, not encouraging, purposely vanishing, and deteriorating. In the participants' own words:

"Not adequate as most children are speaking English and many of them are not attending Panjabi language sessions".

[Jasvin Kaur]

"I get the impression that the Panjabi language is losing its identity, and if this trend continues, it may soon vanish".

[Harminder Singh]

Respondents believe that the Panjabi language is currently facing significant obstacles and that its outlook for the future is not optimistic. The use of 'bleak', 'not bright' and 'dull' suggests that the language lacks vitality or vibrancy. In addition, the use of phrases like 'in danger', 'purposely vanishing' and 'deteriorating' suggests that the respondents believe that the language is facing significant threats that have the potential to lead to its decline or disappearance. Since the Panjabi language has lost its attractiveness and substance, it is considered to be in a deplorable situation, as indicated by the preceding opinions. Overall, the responses suggest that respondents are pessimistic about the future of the Panjabi language and that immediate action may be required to address the challenges facing the language and its speakers.

An Unsupportive Atmosphere

As the study progressed, respondents were asked about the cause of the language's demise. It was discovered that respondents believe their environment is not conducive to language acquisition. According to a response:

"In the majority of gurdwaras and schools, the community does not contribute enough to the development of the language. I believe the Panjabi language can be taught effectively if the Panjabi Education Center and the community establish a conducive environment for children to study and regularly utilise the language".

[Suhvinder Singh]

"The future of the Panjabi language is bright if Punjabi people, Gurdwara committees, Punjabi NGOs, and our youth all work together; else, it will be very difficult".

[Sarvinder Kaur]

Respondents' responses suggest that multiple factors contribute to the difficulties faced by the Panjabi language in Malaysia. The lack of initiatives by various entities to preserve the language highlights a larger issue of institutional support for minority languages, which can have detrimental effects on the vitality and survival of languages. Participants also cited peer pressure and reluctance to speak the language as factors contributing to the decline of the language. This suggests that negative attitudes towards the language may be pervasive among younger generations, which could result in language shift and a decline in the number of active speakers. Lack of exposure to the language, lack of cultural connections, and lack of awareness of the significance of the language may also be contributing to the language's difficulties. Younger generations may be less likely to value and prioritise the preservation of a language if they do not have opportunities to use it and learn about its cultural and historical context. The excerpts make it very evident that the language has significant issues that need to be addressed.

A Lack of Parental Initiative

According to the findings of the survey, there is a lack of motivation to speak or learn one's mother tongue because it is not necessary for communication, either in the workforce or in schools, and as a result, there is no requirement to acquire it. Regrettably, the Panjabi language is viewed primarily as an economic or practical advantage, but not as a means of cultural preservation. Several responders highlighted the lack of parental interest.

"I cannot be certain, but I can claim that Punjabis have little interest in learning their maa boli (mother tongue) because their parents do not speak Panjabi with their children and do not encourage them to do so".

[Narandeep Singh]

"As the majority of us speak English at home, we must teach our mother tongue to the younger generation at an early age. Many parents prefer to educate their children other languages, such as Mandarin, rather than Panjabi. I pray for a happy future for our Panjabi language".

[Kiranjit Kaur]

"Parents fault. Educated parents want to speak English with their children. In Sabah, parents use Bahasa Melayu to communicate. Maa boli (mother tongue) was completely disregarded".

[Eykas Singh]

"At home, not even their parents speak Punjabi. Others in the neighbourhood speak very little Panjabi. Those who speak Panjabi are viewed as less educated and not taken seriously".

[Jaspreet Kaur]

"When speaking Panjabi with their children, Punjabi parents feel timid, but when speaking English with their children, they feel proud. In my case, I am proficient in language but illiterate, and when it comes to my children, when I used to speak Panjabi, my husband thought it was strange, therefore my children do not speak our mother tongue".

[Eykam Kaur]

The responses indicate that parental attitudes and behaviours towards the Panjabi language play a crucial role in determining the survival and vitality of the language. The participants have emphasised the crucial role that parents can play in educating their children about the language and its cultural significance. Concern was expressed by respondents over the lack of parental involvement in promoting and preserving the Panjabi language. Some parents may avoid teaching their children the language because they have no interest in educating their children about the significance of the language. This may be due to the belief that other languages, such as English or Mandarin, are more important for their children's development, or that the Panjabi language is not relevant or useful in modern Malaysia.

This lack of parental initiative can have significant effects on the vitality of the language, as children who are not taught the language at home are less likely to value and prioritise it.

Instead, they may become accustomed to other home languages and disregard Panjabi, making minimal or no effort to learn it. As mentioned by Jaspreet Kaur, Panjabi language speakers re viewed as “*less educated*” explain the reluctance of parents in teaching their children. “*Punjabi parents feel timid*” as mentioned by Ekyam Kaur is unexpected. Since parents hold such negative perception about the language, it is no surprise for their children to feel so. Overall, the responses indicate that parental attitudes and behaviours towards the Panjabi language are crucial factors that may determine the survival and vitality of the language in Malaysia. Parents can play an important role in promoting the language, educating their children about its cultural significance, and ensuring that it is transmitted to future generations. However, without active parental support, the language may continue to face significant obstacles and eventually decline.

Inadequate Exposure to Socio-Religious Materials

When resources are easily accessible, language can endure. Regrettably, Panjabi language does not enjoy such luxury.

“When I visit a bookshop, I never locate any Panjabi-language reading material. It is very aggravating that books on our culture and faith are not as readily available as they are for other cultures”.

[Sarjit Singh]

“Typically, whenever there is a gathering at a gurdwara, it is uncommon to see Panjabi books being sold. Primarily are on material culture like Panjabi outfit, sweets and religious artifacts like kara (bangle). This is one of the reasons why we do not value reading our culture and social-historical texts”.

[Manjit Kaur]

“Even if we have access to the Internet, not everyone is interested in reading Panjabi-language content since we have lost the motivation to do so. We prefer to read in English for greater comprehension, and tragically, only the elder generations will attempt to preserve the reading culture in Panjabi. I wish young people had the same determination”.

[Simran Kaur]

The observed restriction causes the language to deteriorate more. Adding insult to injury, uninformed parents and children are left completely illiterate in the language. The condition makes it difficult for children to learn Panjabi. It is evident from the three main discussions that the minority's effort to preserve their mother tongue cannot be overlooked. The Malaysian Sikh community is a “ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural group” that appears culturally rooted, but whose historical language is steadily declining (Manan, 2011). Rarely does the Sikh minority in Klang Valley speak Panjabi with their in-group or inside their own families (David, et al., 2003; 2015). According to Jaffrelot (2002), many Punjabi parents view the Panjabi language as having no economic value. This means that not knowing the language will not hinder their children's prospects of finding a good career, nor will it help them perform better in school. Thus, many Punjabi parents are not overly concerned if their children cannot communicate in Panjabi. Many Malaysian Punjabi parents are frequently observed conversing in English with their children, a finding supported by the current study's researchers. According to Shafi (2013), there is

sometimes a stigma linked to persons who speak the Panjabi language fluently. This is an interesting element of speaking Panjabi. Shafi (2013) added that colloquially, many would refer to proficient Panjabi speakers as '*pendul*' (Shafi, 2013, p.40). This term is frequently used to describe someone from a rural area who is ignorant and lacks good manners. As a result, many refrain from speaking Panjabi due to the bad connotation associated with it.

According to Nazir et al. (2013), several factors contributed to the intellectual death of the Panjabi language especially in Pakistan. Yet, this is primarily attributable to parents. Parents believe that the Panjabi language lacks prestige, hence it is not essential for their children to learn it as their primary language of communication. Parents in Pakistan and Malaysia appeared to share the opinion of Bourdieu (1991), who asserted that social and economic prestige are two crucial aspects that will ensure the survival of a certain language. The Panjabi language is facing internal issues as a result of the Sikh community's stereotyped attitude toward the language, which labels it as having no economic or commercial worth, placing the language in jeopardy owing to diminishing usage (Kaur, et al., 2021). It has been shown that Malaysian Sikhs prefer English when communicating with their siblings, while their use of Panjabi is limited to interactions with their grandparents. This has a direct influence on Panjabi culture and religion. Researchers Singh and Kaur (2021) and Kaur, et al. (2021) concluded that their data demonstrated that the Panjabi language is dwindling and that it must be maintained in Sikh households and religious gatherings. Although the Sikh NGOs are working hard to teach Panjabi to youngsters, family institutions must also work together to preserve this mother tongue. If this linguistic issue is ignored, the Panjabi language would deteriorate and eventually die out. It is now more important than ever to preserve the Panjabi language for future generations.

As a minority community, Sikhs in Malaysia have considerable challenges in maintaining their mother tongue in daily life. This is because Sikhs prefer the national language and English, which are regarded as having greater social and economic significance. It is believed that the Panjabi language is experiencing a significant setback from inside the community. The proverb "charity begins at home" is accurate. While the holy scripture *Guru Granth Sahib* is written in Panjabi with *Gurmukhi* script, it is the obligation of the parents to ensure that their children understand that Panjabi is actually the language of God. Their children's failure to learn *Gurmukhi* is not a reason for ignoring the spoken language. Due to the fact that Sikhs are bound to *gurdwaras* and participate in holy congregation, the preaching and hymes they hear will no longer be foreign to them. They are more than capable of comprehending the meaning. Thus, *gurdwara* institutions and parents must take an active role in ensuring that children and young speak and preserve Panjabi. According to Kaur et al. (2021) research, the Sikh organizations, particularly the Khalsa Diwan, have made outstanding contributions to the preservation of the Panjabi language. Because to a lack of community support, the group is unable to encourage the Sikh community to communicate more enthusiastically in Panjabi. If the Sikh minority does not make significant efforts to preserve the language, there is a considerable likelihood that it will succumb to the language death phenomena. The evolution of social media should not dominate the language, but rather be viewed as a chance to spread Panjabi. When the language is widely spoken in a community, it offers the speakers optimism and confidence that conversing in Panjabi provides a sense of belonging and identity.

Conclusion

The study identified three main themes that contribute to the challenges faced by the Malaysian Sikh community in preserving their Panjabi language. The first theme is an unsupportive atmosphere, which refers to the lack of social and institutional support for the use and maintenance of Panjabi language. This can be seen in the limited availability of Panjabi language education and materials in Malaysian schools and in the broader cultural context that often emphasizes the use of Malay or English over other languages. The second theme is a lack of parental initiative, which refers to the role of parents in transmitting the Panjabi language to their children. The study found that many parents did not prioritize Panjabi language education for their children, either due to a lack of awareness of its importance or because they themselves did not have strong proficiency in the language. This lack of parental support can contribute to language shift and loss over time. The third theme is inadequate exposure to socio-religious materials, which refers to the lack of access to religious texts, music, and other materials in the Panjabi language. This can be particularly challenging for the Malaysian Sikh community, as religion and language are deeply intertwined. Without adequate exposure to Panjabi-language religious materials, younger generations may not have the same opportunities to learn and use the language in a meaningful way.

These findings highlight the significant challenges faced by the Malaysian Sikh community in preserving their Panjabi language. Without adequate support and resources, the language may continue to face erosion and decline over time. To address these challenges, it may be necessary to increase access to Panjabi language education and materials, raise awareness of the importance of language preservation among parents and the broader community, and work to promote a more supportive and inclusive social and cultural context for the use and maintenance of Panjabi language. The implications of these findings are significant as they highlight the need for action to support the preservation of the Panjabi language among Malaysian Sikhs. Specifically, the findings suggest that there is a need for increased support and resources for Panjabi language education, as well as efforts to raise awareness of the importance of language preservation among parents and the broader community. Additionally, there may be a need for greater access to Panjabi-language religious materials, as religion is a key aspect of the culture and identity of the Malaysian Sikh community. Overall, the implications of this study suggest that there is a pressing need for action to support the survival of minority languages like Panjabi, particularly in the context of global trends toward language shift and loss. By addressing the obstacles identified in this study, it may be possible to help ensure that the Malaysian Sikh community is able to maintain and celebrate their cultural heritage through the continued use and transmission of the Panjabi language.

However, there are some limitations and suggestions for future research related to the study. Firstly, the study was limited to Malaysian Sikhs, so the findings may not be generalizable to other ethnic or linguistic minority communities. Secondly, the sample size was relatively small, which may limit the representativeness of the findings. Lastly, the study focused on the obstacles to language survival, but did not explore potential solutions or interventions in depth. To explore shared hurdles and language conservation remedies, researchers may undertake comparative research involving different ethnic or linguistic minority groups. It is recommended to use mixed methods, comprising both quantitative and qualitative data, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the elements that affect language survival or demise.

Longitudinal studies are also recommended to assess the effectiveness of language preservation measures and monitor the evolution of language use and proficiency. Overall, future research could build on the findings of this study by exploring potential solutions or interventions to support the preservation of minority languages like Punjabi, and by expanding the scope of research to include a wider range of communities and contexts.

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